Essay

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Functionalism and Social Constructionism: Consequences of the Biomedical Model for Understanding Health and Illness in Australia

**Introduction**

The biomedical model for health and illness is the prevalent scientific model for understanding health and illness. Since the Australian public healthcare system comprises mainly of Medicare, this essay will focus largely on Medicare and its impact on health and illness in the context of sociological perspectives. Health is usually perceived in a physical and biological context but the sociological context gives valuable insights into how illness affects society as a whole. In order to understand the sociological context, two major sociological perspectives will be discussed in detail: Functionalism and Social Constructionism. These perspectives will shed light on the importance of sociology in the context of health and illness and a detailed analysis on the implications the aforementioned perspectives will have on the health and illness issues in Australia. The essay will also look at how the biomedical model is influenced by the sociological perspectives and the effect it has on practitioners.

**Discussion and Analysis**

 **Health and Illness**

A uniform definition of health does not exist because of the varying perspectives and concerns but World Health Organization describes it as “state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (World Health Organization. 1946). Illness can be defined as the discomfort when patients experience a breakdown in the way they are feeling or thinking. This could be a physical pain, discomfort or the accompanying behavioral change. However, health is dependent on multiple factors such as psychological and sociological that determine the outcome of health and illness issues. The latter will be discussed in detail in this paper.

**Biomedical Model**

The biomedical model is the primary scientific measure of health and it views illness in a biological context. It regards the patient as a body that can be treated in isolation, without regard to environmental, sociological and even psychological factors. Being the dominant scientific model, the biological model is studied to root out illness and ensure health of an individual. Health practitioners are sanctioned to discover causes of illness and prescribe treatments to overcome the health issue. The Biomedical model is based on biological science – it is wholly focused on getting the answers to queries such as what caused the disease in the first place. However, it does not take into account the social aspect of health, and as discussed in the paper, the social aspect is very important as well.

**Sociology and the Role of Perspectives**

Sociology plays a huge role in well-being of individuals and ensures their health. The interaction of social life and health is studied together as a single subject and is known as sociology of health and illness. The five key social areas which determine health are economic stability, education, social and community context, health and healthcare, and neighborhood and built environment. It is clear that even when one of the aforementioned factors is adversely affected, health will suffer as a result.

Social factors are crucial in determining health and well-being of an individual. Hence, different theoretical perspectives of sociology have to be deliberated upon to discover the causes of illness, the relevant interventions and treatments.

**Sociological Perspectives**

A sociological perspective deals with human behavior and its association with the society as a whole. The interaction of social structures and individuals is a major point of focus of sociological perspectives. Two of the major sociological perspectives in history have been Functionalism and Social Constructionism.

Functionalism is a sociological perspective that views social relations in a structural context – it is primarily concerned with each social structure’s role in maintaining societal order and stability. A common value system, such as religion, forms the basis of an orderly system. Functionalism sees each component of a society as a part of the whole, with its own function. When a society is running smoothly and there is order, it denotes that each individual social structure is performing its function adequately. When a certain individual or social structure lags behind or fails to perform its function in an appropriate manner, it becomes easier to identify the perpetrator and responsibility can be fixed. This makes it convenient to address the issue and work towards resolving it so society can return to order.

The functionalist perspective in sociology of health and illness is concerned with the functions being performed by individuals that maintain order in the society in a healthcare context(1). This ensures well-being of citizens and the overall health of all individuals in society. The main proponent of functionalism in the context of sociology of health and illness is Talcott Parsons. Parsons views illness as a social deviance because it hinders the functionality of an individual and paves for the way for disorder in society.

Social Constructionism is the perspective that challenges the notion of essential truths. It considers all ‘universal’ truths to be socially constructed, relegating them from the category of absolute truths. Social Constructionism argues that all ‘truth’ has been socially constructed and hence is susceptible to being influenced by power relations. This leads to the core of social constructionism theory: knowledge is not constant, rather it is changing. The fluid nature of knowledge and truth leads social constructivists to question basic ideals as well as established norms.

Social Constructionism in sociology of health and illness emphasizes upon the interpretation of health and illness in a socio-cultural context(2). Although, social constructivists do not deny the biological reality of pain, disease and illness, they tend to focus on the non-biological aspect of these phenomena. Social Constructionism opines that despite the biological realities behind illness and pain, such experiences are inevitably understood, and interpreted in a social and cultural context. Therefore, it is crucial to look at the issues in a socio-cultural as well as socio-historical context to fully understand the situation. Furthermore, Social Constructivists argue that medical research and the knowledge that is ultimately derived from it is not a steadily progressive process. Rather, the medical knowledge is gained through a step-by-step procedure in which each step is affected by the socio-historical realities of the time. Therefore, it is vital to consider each step in the context of the social, cultural and historical realities in order to understand its progression and significance in the field.

**Health and Illness in Social Context**

 This portion will cover a detailed explanation of how health issues and costs are interpreted in a sociological context. It will also detail the effect this has on the conventional biomedical model.

 Medicare covers the basic costs of pregnancy related issues such as infertility. In the biomedical model, a woman would be considered as a body which has to be put back to work after her treatment. It will only look at the resolution of the issue through provision of assisted reproductive treatments such as IVF. On the other hand, sociological perspective such as Functionalism would perceive the situation as a hindrance in the social order and would work towards solving the issue as quickly as possible. This would ensure that the individual in question returns to normal life so the required functions are not left unattended. The Social Constructionism perspective will begin by questioning the very basis of the issue such as the desire for pregnancy. This particular perspective will opine that pregnancy is not necessary to achieve happiness and this notion is only a societal construction. It will go on to detail that the issue of infertility is disturbing the individual’s societal participation and in turn, is bringing imbalance to the society.

 In order to cater for this perspective, Medicare also offers pregnancy counselling sessions to ensure that the individual is informed of all the facts of the situation and to clear any doubts(3). These sessions also help the individual who might be feeling different kinds of emotions as she goes through something entirely new. Social adjustment could become difficult and a changed lifestyle might invite new problems that require a pregnancy counsellor’s expertise. This shows the importance of sociological perspectives and their impact on the biomedical model for health and illness. A new type of treatment is added in the universal healthcare system in Australia because of the sociological aspect of a health related issue.

**Conclusion**

 The paper describes the sociological perspectives and their consequences for the biomedical model in health and illness in Australia. Functionalism is an older perspective and is somewhat on the decline in the field of sociology of health and illness. It does not take into account the social life of individuals, and how they react to events on an emotional level. Social Constructionism, on the other hand, is a relatively new concept and has quickly taken root in the sociology of health and illness. It has already impacted the biomedical model by adding new elements like counselling to cater for evolving issues in the field of health and illness. The element of Medicare and how governments are reacting to the changing scenario is proof of the growing importance and need of sociological perspectives such as Social Constructionism and Functionalism in the field of sociology of health and illness.

References:

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